



Crossing borders

State-sponsored interference in diaspora communities in the Netherlands

AIVD and NCTV



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Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of foreign residents in the Netherlands are seen by authorities of other countries, as their own nationals as they themselves, their parents or their grandparents, were born there.. All residents of the Netherlands, regardless of their background, have the rights that come with our democracy. Such as freedom of expression, freedom of information and the right to demonstrate. Yet the rights and freedoms of some Dutch citizens, and those of their children and grandchildren, may be endangered in our country by the authorities or intelligence services from their country of birth. These may spy on them (or try to use them for espionage), intimidate them, even kidnap and kill them. There are unfortunately plenty of recent examples of this in Western countries – including the Netherlands.

The General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) and the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV) describe the various ways in which foreign governments interfere with Dutch nationals with a migration background with the term “state-sponsored interference in diaspora communities”.¹ A phenomenon that can deeply affect those communities and the lives of individual victims, undermining the democratic legal order in the Netherlands. State-sponsored interference in diaspora communities therefore poses a threat to our national security.

Although state-sponsored interference by foreign governments is often directed against various types of targets, such as government agencies, media, politicians and journalists, this analysis focuses on interference in diaspora communities. From politics and society, there is a lot of attention and interest for this particular form of interference. Moreover, it deeply affects (the sense of) security, well-being and privacy of Dutch citizens with a migration background. With this publication, the AIVD and NCTV aim to help government organisations and also society to better recognise and understand state-sponsored interference in diaspora communities. In order to counter this where possible. This publication provides an analysis of the phenomenon based on intelligence research by the AIVD and signals of state-sponsored interference

¹ Since 2022, Statistics Netherlands has used an origin classification consisting of two components: ‘born in the Netherlands’ and ‘country of origin’. Migrants are born abroad, children of migrants are born in the Netherlands and have at least one foreign-born parent. The origin of people born abroad is determined by their own country of birth. For people born in the Netherlands, origin is determined by the country of birth of the parents. This classification refers to anyone officially residing in the Netherlands, regardless of nationality and regardless of whether the stay is temporary (e.g. for study purposes).

received from various government agencies. That non-public knowledge has been supplemented with insights from scientific studies and media coverage.

The AIVD and NCTV realise that the term diaspora (community) unfairly suggests a certain homogeneity and sense of community, which does not do justice to the diversity and individuality of Dutch citizens with a migration background. Wherever possible, this publication is mindful of the wide differences that exist between and within diaspora communities (even if these are not defined on a community-by-community basis), and differences in the degree and manner of interference by foreign governments.

The AIVD and NCTV consider it important to provide clear examples of the forms of state-sponsored interference described. As this is a public text, it can only be done on the basis of publicly known events previously confirmed and described by governments or journalists. Some of these situations took place outside the Netherlands. Depending on certain circumstances, such as the presence of a so-called high-profile individual in our country, they may also take place in the Netherlands.

The use of publicly known examples may raise the question of what intelligence the AIVD has on such cases. That question cannot be answered in a public text. Nevertheless, we chose to include the examples because it is precisely the practice that shows how foreign governments operate, and why state-sponsored interference in diaspora communities is such a danger to our democratic legal order.

Reading guide

The first chapter of this analysis provides context, by defining concepts such as 'state-sponsored interference' and 'democratic legal order' more precisely. The chapters that follow reveal why foreign governments interfere with diaspora communities (chapter 2) and in what ways they do so (chapter 3). Chapter 4 describes a number of elements that complicate the understanding of the phenomenon of state-sponsored interference and create challenges in addressing it. Finally, chapter 5 provides the conclusion of the AIVD and NCTV that state-sponsored interference by various foreign governments is likely to have a significant impact on the Dutch democratic legal order.



1 State-sponsored interference and the democratic legal order

1.1 The broader context of state-sponsored interference

State-sponsored interference is an umbrella term for different ways in which foreign governments try to interfere or get involved in the affairs of the Netherlands. State-sponsored interference includes **any activity that undermines the democratic legal order and which is undertaken by a foreign government or proxyII on behalf of a foreign government**. It involves a wide range of activities by other countries, directed against different types of targets, such as government agencies, media and academic institutions, as well as individuals such as politicians, administrators, journalists and other citizens.²

This phenomenon analysis focuses on a specific type of state-sponsored interference. Namely, interference directed against a specific group of targets: individuals and organisations belonging to diaspora communities residing in the Netherlands.^{III 3}

There are also foreign actors who undermine the Dutch democratic legal order but are not part of a state or a proxy thereof. For example, certain foreign extremist and terrorist groups. These actors pose a threat to national security and naturally have the attention of the AIVD and NCTV but because there is no interference by a foreign state, it is not part of this phenomenon analysis.

1.2 Protecting the democratic legal order

To understand how state-sponsored interference poses a threat to the democratic legal order, it is important to know what exactly is meant by that term. The democratic legal order is not only a political system but also a way of living together. It involves both the relationship between government and citizens (the democratic state based on the rule of law) and the relationship between citizens (the open society). Media and science

II Proxies are third parties such as companies, hacker groups or local criminal groups that are used by foreign governments because of their capabilities and/or the possibility of hiding their own involvement. Chapter 3 of this analysis further explains the use of proxy organisations by foreign governments.

III The Dutch government has been aware of the threat of interference by foreign governments for years. Since 2018, the government has adopted an approach against state interference (Countering State-sponsored interference – CFI), targeting various interference activities by other countries, including activities targeting diaspora communities. For a recent consideration of CFI, see also the Clingendael Institute’s conceptual research into this notion.

play an important role in the undisturbed, mutual interaction between the democratic rule of law and the open society. Figure 1 shows these relationships schematically.

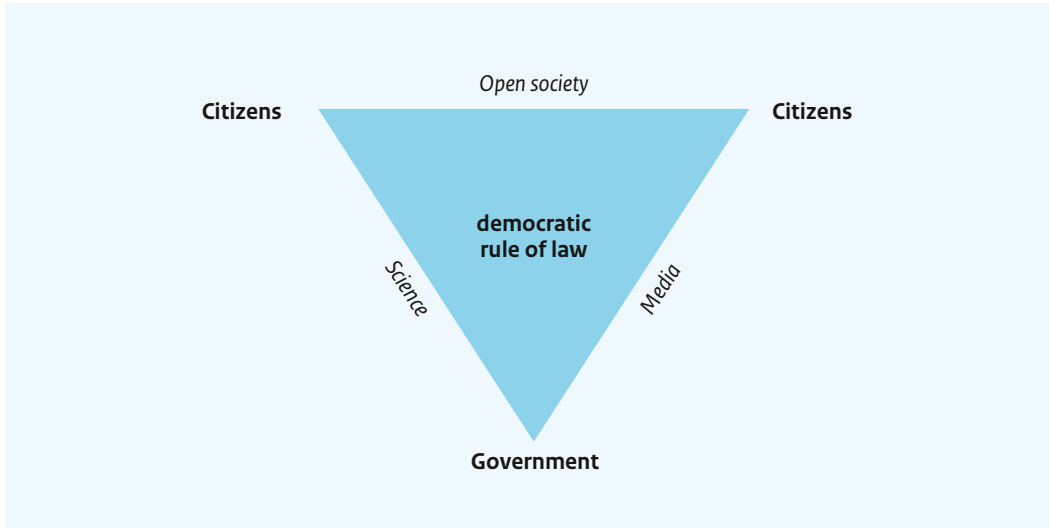


Figure 1. Dimensions of a democratic legal order

In the Netherlands, we strive for a social climate based on law and democracy, in which individuals can live undisturbed and groups of people can coexist well in society. A well-functioning democratic legal order is embodied by a political and administrative system of integrity, controlled by elected representatives of the people. Independent judges, journalists and scientists play an important role in this system. There is solidarity in society and sufficient trust between citizens and groups of citizens. The creation of perceived enemies is avoided wherever possible. Freedom is an inseparable part of our democratic legal order: Dutch citizens, regardless of their background, must be able to make choices freely when it comes to the organisation of their lives, (political) preferences and ties with their country of origin or that of their parents or grandparents.⁴

1.3 Manifestations of state-sponsored interference

State-sponsored interference can affect our democratic legal order in several ways. We distinguish three manifestations: transnational repression, undermining influence and intelligence activities aimed at residents of the Netherlands. These forms are not always strictly distinguishable from each other and are sometimes interrelated. For instance, intelligence activities can be used for transnational repression and undermining influence, or vice versa. These forms apply not only to individuals and groups within diaspora communities, but also to the broad phenomenon of state-sponsored interference that does not focus exclusively on diaspora communities. Chapter 3 uses examples to illustrate the extent to which these three forms of state-sponsored interference concretely take place against individuals and groups within diaspora communities in the Netherlands.

Transnational repression

Transnational repression refers to activities by or on behalf of foreign governments, targeting individuals or organisations abroad that they perceive to be threats or adversaries. These activities range from imposing travel restrictions to threats, assault, kidnapping and murder. Transnational repression can target individuals, organisations or communities as a whole, such as administrators, politicians, journalists or (individuals in) diaspora communities. Foreign governments thus try to censor critical voices, obtain information or otherwise force the target to cooperate. Repressive activities threaten the physical and social safety of residents of the Netherlands and create feelings of insecurity, (mutual) distrust and (self) censorship.

Undermining influence

Undermining influence refers to the efforts of foreign governments to improve their reputation, with the aim of countering criticism as much as possible, increasing their influence abroad and influencing political and public opinion on certain issues to their own advantage. For instance, they try to influence the public debate by further fuelling certain sides of the societal divide/polarised situation. Some countries are also covertly trying to gain political influence, spread anti-Western sentiments, undermine the international liberal world order, or break up Western alliances such as the EU and NATO. To that end, foreign governments (covertly and overtly) spread propaganda and undermining ideology,^{IV} or support and finance the spread of such forms of information manipulation by others. Foreign governments also spread disinformation, or facilitate its spread. While it can often be difficult to attribute disinformation campaigns to specific governments, academic research points to several countries deploying disinformation targeting domestic and foreign audiences.⁵ Technological developments, for example in the field of artificial intelligence (AI), are making it increasingly easy for foreign governments to mount large-scale disinformation campaigns and reach people remotely and on a large scale. There are also foreign governments that try to infiltrate institutions of the democratic rule of law through, for example, bribery or by recruiting staff within these institutions as agents of influence. Individuals and groups are used (sometimes knowingly, sometimes unknowingly) as instruments of a foreign government to influence political decision and policy-making and social sentiment in the Netherlands. Undermining influence thus poses a threat to the integrity of the democratic rule of law and the open society.

Not all forms of foreign influence pose a threat to our democratic legal order. State-sponsored interference must therefore be distinguished from foreign *influence*.^V Almost every government, including the Dutch government, tries to garner support for certain ideas and interests or settle differences of opinion through regular diplomatic relations, public diplomacy and media coverage. Foreign influence is not undermining when it is done openly and legitimately, respecting the norms and values of the Dutch democratic legal order.

IV These are ideas that create divides, tensions or polarisation within a society, or erode society's trust in the government. Examples include creating perceived enemies among populations or communities, or dehumanising certain groups within the population. Subversive ideology is not necessarily the same as disinformation.

V Soft power and sharp power are internationally used terms used in academia to distinguish between 'accepted' foreign influence and 'subversive' interference.

Intelligence activities targeting residents of the Netherlands

Intelligence activities of foreign governments targeting individuals residing in the Netherlands are about (covertly) collecting data on (activities of) individuals and organisations. These intelligence activities are not isolated, but intended to support, for instance, transnational repression, undermining influence, or other types of threats, like economic espionage. Regardless of their intended goal, these kinds of intelligence activities undermine the democratic legal order. Moreover, a foreign government secretly collecting data on individuals in the Netherlands does not take into account the privacy standards we guarantee in the Netherlands. Therefore, we also consider unauthorised intelligence activities by foreign governments in the Netherlands, despite being mainly a means to other ends, in themselves as state-sponsored interference. Moreover, intelligence activities sometimes go hand-in-hand with transnational repression and covert influence, where people are coerced by foreign governments to spy or influence institutions. As such, these activities erode the freedoms of individuals and groups, and thus also undermine the democratic legal order.



2 The motives behind state-sponsored interference

2.1 Activities targeting diaspora communities: in the interest of citizens or in the interest of the state?

Governments have various reasons to actively reach out to their communities abroad, and have a view of what exactly is going on within those communities. Most countries, including the Netherlands, use diaspora policy for this purpose. What form that policy takes, varies per country. Many governments regard individuals who are part of their communities abroad as their full citizens, and see it as their responsibility to protect the interests of those citizens at all times.

Sometimes, however, in maintaining a link between government and diaspora, or keeping a view on those communities, it is not (only) the interest of the citizen that prevails, but also or especially the interest of the government. The dividing line between an agenda designed to serve the interest of the citizen and one that serves the interest of the state can be a thin one. Moreover, the perception of (individuals in) the community plays a role: for some, manifestations of diaspora policy are a positive sign of interest from the country of origin, for others they are undesirable forms of influence that are perceived as threatening.

Whether a foreign government targeting its diaspora crosses the line in terms of what is permissible is thus determined by several factors: the actual intention of a government, the resources it deploys, the impact of those resources on the diaspora community and the prevailing norms and values in the country where the community is situated.

State-sponsored interference is determined by the perspective on security

A foreign government will use its own frame of reference to determine what resources it deploys when it comes to individuals in communities abroad. In many countries, diaspora policy is inextricably linked to national policy and even national security. Some countries do not shy away from using force against their former citizens if this enables them to eliminate a threat or perceived threat. Other countries operate in a more subtle way towards their diaspora to achieve their goals.

The frameworks used by other countries may therefore differ from those we are familiar with in the Netherlands. From the Dutch perspective on security, it is sometimes not logical for a foreign government to consider a particular person a security risk, and thus a target. Retaining power often plays a leading role, but specific circumstances (e.g. political, religious, cultural or historical) can also prompt a state to attach a compelling security interest to something – and thus to also deem the taking of serious measures acceptable. For instance, for some countries, the way in which their national history is told (e.g. the narrative on atrocities committed during a civil war) is a matter of national interest. The case study below illustrates this.

In 2020, Paul Rusesabagina, a Rwandan with Belgian nationality, was abducted by the Rwandan authorities. Rusesabagina was supposed to fly from Dubai to Burundi on a private plane, but instead the plane landed in the Rwandan capital Kigali. There he was arrested and sentenced to 25 years in prison for terrorism in 2021. Rusesabagina is known for the film Hotel Rwanda, based on his (heroic) role at the time of the genocide. For the Rwandan authorities, however, Rusesabagina's fame posed a threat, as did the way his view of the genocide deviated from the Rwandan government's 'official' narrative. Rusesabagina was released again in 2023, reportedly after diplomatic efforts by the United States.⁶

Foreign governments pursuing diaspora policies that do not seek to promote civic interests are mostly driven by the motives of protecting stability in their own countries, retaining and increasing their own power. State-sponsored interference towards the diaspora contributes to this in various ways. How this happens, and thus what drives countries to engage with their communities abroad, is explained below using four different categories.

2.2 Influencing public opinion and politics through diaspora communities

Via the diaspora, a government can influence public opinion and politics abroad. The diaspora can be used to improve the reputation or image of the country of origin abroad, for instance by spreading a positive message about the country of origin. Diaspora communities have a potentially large voice in society: the larger the community, the greater the potential influence. Sometimes certain individuals within a community are part of the political-administrative system in another country, or hold other influential positions.

When foreign governments use their diaspora communities to enhance their reputation abroad, or otherwise exert influence, it is not necessarily undermining towards our democratic legal order. The dividing line, however, is thin and easily crossed. When reputation or image enhancement is equivalent to countering negative perceptions by silencing critical voices abroad through intimidation or threats, it is indeed undermining. This is particularly true when foreign governments try to influence the course of justice through intimidation in court cases that, in their view, create negative perceptions. These may include cases prosecuting individuals suspected of genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes and taking place in international courts such as the International Criminal Court in The Hague. But it can also involve cases at national and local level, where, for example, someone is on trial suspected of committing crimes on the instructions of a foreign government. In addition, garnering support for one's own interests is also not so innocent when covert and unlawful means are used to influence political or public opinion.

2.3 Financial-economic interests

Foreign governments have a financial-economic interest in maintaining good ties with their communities abroad. Citizens abroad can provide additional income, by making investments in their country of origin (e.g. by buying property) or by providing financial support to family remaining in that country.^{VI7} Some countries try to raise money from their communities abroad on their own initiative, under the banner of voluntary contributions. That in itself is not illegal, provided it is done voluntarily and without coercion.

Research made it clear that many Eritreans experience (social) pressure to pay the 'diaspora tax' the Eritrean authorities collect (or have collected) from their diaspora in the Netherlands. Persons who do not pay this are dismissed within the community as opponents of Eritrea. Added to this, the non-payment of the tax would create problems if Eritreans abroad need cooperation from the Eritrean authorities, for instance to do business in Eritrea or to be buried there.⁸

A good relationship with the diaspora can also ensure that expertise and knowledge gained abroad will at some point flow back to the country of origin and contribute to the development of the economy there. Several countries have created special government programmes to ensure that compatriots who acquire knowledge abroad return to the country of origin. Those programmes are aimed at students, for example, who were able to study abroad thanks to scholarships. Often, they are immediately offered a job with a good salary or other attractive benefits. In some cases, return is not voluntary but a condition that comes with the scholarship.

The Chinese government offers its residents study abroad scholarships. In the Netherlands, this is arranged by the China Scholarship Council (CSC), a non-profit organisation affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. The CSC has several requirements for obtaining such a scholarship, which curtail the freedoms of the particular students in our country, including pledges of the student's loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party, return and guarantee clauses, and clauses on guidance from and/or obedience to the Chinese embassy or consulate in the destination country. The latter facilitates the possibility of the monitoring of the student in question by an embassy or consulate – something that also takes place in the Netherlands, according to public academic research.⁹

2.4 Maintaining own authority and protection against (presumed) terrorism

For some governments, protecting their own authority and security is the main reason for keeping a grip on their diaspora. Authorities of the country of origin see persons within the diaspora as full citizens and as part of their own society, or even as an extension of their power and influence. These nationals are therefore expected to abide by the political or ideological guidelines, laws and (behavioural) rules of their country of origin (that are also often subject to change). This may go against the Dutch constitutionally established

VI This is usually referred to as remittance: payments from Dutch nationals with a migration background sent to people they know in their country of origin. De Nederlandsche Bank keeps track of the amount of remittances each country receives from the Netherlands. The volume of remittances is related to the size of the diaspora community in the Netherlands: the larger the community, the larger the volume. The combined volume of remittances to the five countries that received the largest volume of remittances from the Netherlands in 2020 (Morocco, Turkey, Suriname, Indonesia and China) was almost €300 million.

principle that everyone here is a full Dutch citizen and should also be able to participate in society fully and with full freedom of choice and movement.

For this reason, certain behaviours or utterances of individuals within a diaspora, can be seen - by the foreign government - as a threat to the national security, or a threat to the government itself. What is considered a threat, or what is a matter of national security, can be interpreted broadly. Possible threats include individuals or organisations perceived as terrorists in the eyes of the foreign government, those who are openly politically opposed to a government, those who organise (or have organised) activities considered to be in conflict with the interests of a foreign government, or those who criticise the human rights situation in the country of origin. But it also includes individuals who, in the eyes of a government, move too far away from the country of origin by adopting a lifestyle that is 'too Western'. Some countries target women who have fled to the West because of personal or political freedoms. Public surveys report examples from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Syria and Iran.¹⁰ These examples describe how women were targeted with (online) threats and intimidation, abuse and other physical violence as they tried to flee their country and the authoritarian system that restricted their rights and freedoms.

Some foreign governments are willing to go to great lengths to protect their own authority and national security. In doing so, they see an aggressive stance against (in their view) hostile forces abroad as necessary. This can result in heavy repressive activities against high-profile individuals within diaspora communities who are considered traitors.

In February 2024, 28-year-old Russian helicopter pilot Maksim Kuzminov was found murdered in a coastal town near Alicante. Kuzminov made world news in 2023 after he defected to Ukraine. International media reported that according to Spanish intelligence, the murder was carried out by assassins on the instructions of the Kremlin. The head of Russian foreign intelligence SVR informed Russian state news agency TASS shortly after the murder that the deserted pilot was a "traitor and criminal" who "became a moral corpse the moment he planned his dirty and terrible crime".¹¹

2.5 Monitoring of diaspora communities

The governments of various countries are meticulously mapping communities abroad, monitoring individuals and organisations within these communities and collecting intelligence on them. These intelligence activities mainly support activities of transnational repression or covert influence. Foreign governments are thus trying to identify opportunities. For example, particular individuals within a community might have a certain prestige or status with which they could mobilise others in their community. This makes them potentially a useful tool of influence for another country (see also section 3.2.).

Moreover, for some countries, intelligence activities towards diaspora communities serve their own repressive agendas. That is, if the freedoms of the population in the country of origin are restricted and political opponents are seen as a threat, it is likely that the authorities of that country will also target their citizens abroad in the same way. Intelligence activities then keep individuals and communities abroad under surveillance – and, where possible, under their thumb. For instance, several countries collect intelligence on political opponents and journalists who have fled abroad, or on citizens suspected of involvement in (what they see as) terrorist organisations.

International media reported in April 2024 that a man of German and Chinese nationality was arrested in Dresden, Germany, on suspicion of spying for China. The man, working for a German political party's lead candidate for the European Parliament, allegedly not only passed on information about the European Parliament decision-making, but also spied on Chinese opposition members in Germany, posing as a Chinese dissident.¹²



3 Manifestations of state-sponsored interference

3.1 Transnational repression

Several countries are known to conduct repression campaigns against dissidents abroad. Foreign governments deploy severe repressive means against individuals or organisations within diaspora communities to silence critical voices, obtain information, or force them to return to the country of origin. Loved ones in the country of origin may also face this kind of repression. This includes threats, assault, kidnapping and murder. Transnational repression not only affects diaspora communities, but also affects others who make critical voices heard or are otherwise perceived as threats. In 2023, a Dutch journalist revealed that she had been the victim of a campaign of intimidation after publishing a series of articles about issues sensitive to China and people in the diaspora speaking out about them.¹³

The use of proxy organisations in transnational repression

Transnational repression is usually carried out or initiated by an intelligence agency of the country concerned. Foreign governments also use organisations and individuals abroad with whom they have no direct relationship. These so-called proxies are not directly part of a government, but are used by them as a tool. Examples include organisations or companies, nationalist individuals or groups, hacker groups and local criminal groups abroad. Proxies not only have relevant capabilities that a government can use for its own purposes, but the use of a proxy also provides the advantage of plausible deniability: in the event of revelation and negative consequences or reporting, it allows a foreign government to deny direct involvement.

The Swedish security service Säpo publicly disclosed in May 2024 that the Iranian regime uses criminal networks in Sweden to carry out violent actions against groups or individuals in Sweden that Iran considers a threat. According to the Säpo, Iran has for years been carrying out activities in Sweden that threaten Swedish security interests and its people. Iranian activities mainly target dissident groups and certain individuals within the Iranian diaspora.¹⁴

Physical violence and (attempted) liquidations

The most far-reaching form of transnational repression is the use of violence. This includes physical assault and even liquidations or attempted liquidations. The use of physical violence by a foreign government is determined by the presence of its (alleged) adversaries in another country, the extent to which these adversaries threaten national security or their own authority in the eyes of that government, and the assumed (diplomatic) repercussions as a result of the violence committed. Examples include persons suspected or convicted of terrorism^{VII} or 'high treason' in the country of origin, or members of an opposition or separatist movement. By some foreign governments, using violence against these individuals is seen as an effective, proportionate and justified means of eliminating threats. There are also examples of these forms of transnational repression in the Netherlands.

In 2015, Mohammad Reza Kolahi Samadi, a Dutchman of Iranian origin, was liquidated in Almere. An Amsterdam criminal, a prominent individual in the cocaine business at the time, was sentenced to life in prison for this murder. Although the public prosecutor could not find out who instructed the killing, the AIVD revealed in January 2019 that there were strong indications that Iran was involved in Samadi's liquidation. The AIVD also said there were strong indications that Iran was involved in the 2017 liquidation of Ahmad Molla Nissi in The Hague.¹⁵ In Iran, Samadi was part of the Marxist-Islamic resistance movement MKO, which aims to overthrow the Iranian regime. Nissi was part of the separatist movement ASMLA. Both organisations used (terrorist) violence in Iran. In 2022, a Pakistani Briton was convicted in the UK for conspiring with others to murder a Pakistani dissident and human rights activist living in the Netherlands. This man, with tens of thousands of followers on X, writes critically about human rights violations by Pakistani security forces and the disappearance of Pakistani activists and journalists. In 2020, he was assaulted on the streets of Rotterdam; this involved intimidation from the Pakistani secret service.¹⁶

There are several other public examples of assassination operations, successful or unsuccessful, against opponents of foreign governments: several assassination plans have been prevented, as well as carried out, in various European countries in recent years. These cases show that violent activities by or at the initiative of a foreign government or its proxies can actually take place anywhere.

One of the most famous cases is probably the murder of journalist and open critic of Saudi royalty Jamal Khashoggi, at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018, partly because of the details that came to light about the case.¹⁷ Russia is also forcefully curbing individual targets abroad (such as critics, defectors or alleged terrorists) perceived as threats to the security of the Russian regime. The perpetrators do not shy from using violence and murder, as evidenced by the poisoning of Sergei Skripal (and his daughter Yulia) in the UK in 2018 and the murder of an alleged Chechen–Georgian terrorist in a Berlin zoo in 2019.¹⁸ More recently, allegations have been made regarding planned and executed assassinations against opponents of the Indian government in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and Pakistan. Several investigations into this are ongoing.¹⁹

VII A suspicion or conviction of terrorism does not necessarily mean that the person in question is actually involved in terrorist attacks. Some foreign governments deliberately label their (political) opponents as terrorists, as a 'legitimate' reason to imprison them. However, this can also include individuals who are also suspected of terrorist activities from a Dutch perspective, such as for the use of terrorist violence. In September 2021, for example, the public prosecutor demanded six years in prison for an Iranian from Delft for preparing and financing attacks and participating in a terrorist organisation. This organisation involved the Iranian separatist movement ASMLA. It is relevant to note here that a Dutch suspicion on grounds of terrorism does not necessarily mean that a suspect/convict will be extradited to the country of origin. For example, the Netherlands never extradites people to countries that impose the death penalty – such as Iran.

Forced repatriation (abduction)

Forced repatriation or abduction is another far-reaching form of transnational repression. Governments of other countries try to track down dissidents abroad to (forcibly) take them back to the country of origin. This can happen via an abduction on the street, or via complex operations where a victim is lured away from the place where they are staying. In this way, they can try a dissident in a (sham) trial, making an example of them for other opponents or critics.

Besides the aforementioned example of the abduction of Rwandan Paul Rusesabagina, other countries have been known to forcibly retrieve, or attempt to retrieve, dissident compatriots.

In March 2024, a group of individuals tried to bring Chinese dissident Ling Huazhan back to China from France. Ling had been publicly criticising Chinese authorities for some time and was taken to an airport in France under pressure in March. Due to intervention by French border police, this repatriation attempt ultimately failed. Reportedly, Ling continues to receive threats, and family members in China are still being pressured.²⁰ In 2017, former Vietnamese politician and businessman Trinh Xuan Thanh was kidnapped in broad daylight in Berlin by employees of the Vietnamese intelligence service and Vietnamese embassy in Berlin. Several Vietnamese residing in Europe were also involved in the abduction.²¹ In October 2020, Swedish-Iranian Habib Chaab was abducted in Istanbul by suspected Iranian agents after travelling to Turkey from Sweden earlier. Chaab allegedly belonged to the separatist movement ASMLA and was held responsible by the Iranian regime for a deadly attack in Iran in 2018. Chaab was sentenced to death in Iran and executed in 2023.²² In May 2021, Belarusian journalist Roman Protasevich was arrested at Minsk airport. The plane he was in was en route from Greece to Lithuania when it was diverted to Minsk by order of Belarusian authorities. Protasevich was listed as an alleged terrorist by the Belarusian security service KGB. He was sentenced to eight years in prison, but was pardoned in May 2023.²³

Threats and intimidation

Foreign governments also use threats and intimidation to achieve their goals. These are attempts to get dissidents to stop unwanted – for example, political-activist – activities or stop them from cooperating with authorities in their country of residence. By silencing criticism, self-censorship is enforced among the rest of the diaspora community. Intimidation and threats can be made physically, as well as remotely or digitally.

There have been several reports in Dutch media in recent years about the experiences of Uighurs living in our country. For example, they are phoned by family members or by the local police or authorities in China and thus receive a direct or indirect message that these family members are under the control of the Chinese police or government. That message is usually accompanied by the clear ‘request’ to stop certain activities, such as publishing critical publications or participating in or organising demonstrations, or to cooperate with the Chinese authorities.²⁴ In 2022, the umbrella organisation Universiteiten Nederland reported to Dutch media that a Russian scientist and several Russian students in the Netherlands had received harassing phone calls. The callers said they were from the Russian government and asked them where their loyalties lay in the war with Ukraine. The AIVD confirmed the practices after the reported incidents and made a direct link to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russians in the Netherlands have access to free media and contact with family or acquaintances in Russia. That critical view they convey is seen by the Russian government as undesirable.²⁵

Apart from intimidation (by telephone and otherwise) and threats (digitally and otherwise), foreign authorities use tactics and means such as doxing (deliberately spreading contact and address details), online smear campaigns, social media and messenger applications, or by involving or threatening family members still living in the country of origin (or insinuating that this is being done). Sometimes governments use

proxies to carry out these acts and intimidate dissidents, for example local criminals abroad or other individuals within the same diaspora communities.

Administrative repression

Foreign governments also deploy repressive measures of an administrative nature. For example, individuals may be put on a no-fly list without due cause, their voting rights in the country of origin may be revoked, or they (or family members) may be denied visas to visit the country of origin. Revoking passports so that critics or alleged terrorists cannot leave the country is another example of a repressive measure. For example, Turkish authorities revoked more than 230,000 passports after the coup attempt in 2016, in an attempt to prevent individuals who may have been linked to the coup attempt from leaving the country.²⁶ This measure also works in the other direction, against persons who in fact want to travel to the country of origin. In that case, deliberately seizing a passport on arrival, or denying entry to the country, is a coercive measure to make individuals cooperate with the authorities. There are several examples of cases where such repressive administrative measures also affect persons living in the Netherlands.

In April 2019, a Dutch local SP politician of Turkish origin was arrested while on holiday in Turkey with family. His passport was taken away and he was banned from leaving the country. The Turkish state accused him of terrorist activities and sympathies, and of being a member of the Kurdish terrorist organisation PKK. According to the man himself, the charges were based solely on a number of critical posts about the Turkish government that he posted on X (then Twitter). After two months, the man was acquitted by a Turkish judge and allowed to leave Turkey again.²⁷

To support their repressive activities, some foreign governments abuse international cooperation and data-sharing agreements with other countries. These agreements are necessary to counter certain international threats, such as terrorism, or to bring persons suspected of war crimes or genocide to justice. However, they can also be abused, as the example below shows.

Critics of the Rwandan government fear that, despite their Western European passports or residence permits, they will be sent back to Rwanda on false grounds. Research by the investigative collective OCCRP reveals that for years the Rwandan government provided false information to US agencies about US residents born in Rwanda, and that Interpol was allegedly misused to detect people internationally. According to research by Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad and the international research consortium Forbidden Stories, the Rwandan government also accuses dissidents living in the Netherlands of involvement in the genocide, in order to promote the sending back of these people or force their extradition.²⁸

It is a method that authoritarian regimes often use. For example, some authoritarian governments label political opponents abroad as terrorists or extremists in order to persuade other countries to extradite them. It is often difficult for those countries to assess whether accusations of terrorism or involvement in genocide are actually true.

To what extent does transnational repression occur in the Netherlands?

Intelligence research confirms that several foreign governments engage in repressive activities targeting individuals and groups within diaspora communities in the Netherlands. The vast majority of cases involve (online) threats and intimidation, or administrative forms of repression. Virtually all autocratic countries that act repressively towards their own people at home also do so to a greater or lesser extent towards their communities abroad. This means that communities in the Netherlands may have to deal with this.

In addition, some foreign governments pose a threat of violence against specific individuals in the Netherlands. The liquidations of Samadi and Nissi in 2015 and 2017 and the foiled assassination attempt on a Pakistani dissident in 2022 show that the most severe forms of physical violence by or on behalf of a foreign government can also take place in the Netherlands. This most severe form of threat of violence from foreign governments in the Netherlands has manifested itself mainly from Iran, and to a lesser extent from Pakistan. Based partly on recent examples in other Western countries, the AIVD and NCTV consider it likely, though there have not been concrete threats, that the governments of Belarus, Russia and Rwanda, among others, would also be willing to attack or abduct influential opponents of their governments if they were to reside in the Netherlands. The authorities of these countries direct the most severe form of violence exclusively against individuals who are considered a major (political) threat. Not all the countries listed have persons currently residing in the Netherlands who match that profile.

3.2 Undermining influence through diaspora communities

Foreign governments openly and covertly carry out undermining influence activities targeting politics and society via diaspora communities abroad. Intelligence research has established that a number of foreign governments also make attempts in the Netherlands to (openly or covertly) influence decision-making of the Dutch rule of law or sentiment in Dutch society or parts thereof.²⁹ Undermining influence on politics or society by foreign governments does not always take place via diaspora communities. For example, the bribery of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) by Qatar and Morocco, which came to light in 2022,³⁰ showed that, for example, even leading figures within national and international politics are used for this kind of undermining activities.

Whole-of-state and whole-of-society

Foreign governments often use a so-called whole-of-state approach to covertly influence politics or society. This means they do not limit themselves to their own security apparatus, but use all parts of their own government to interfere in other countries. Therefore, diplomatic representations, such as embassies or state-run media organisations, are used extensively. There are foreign governments that abuse the opportunities available to their embassy staff abroad, or that deploy individuals under so-called diplomatic cover. In that case they carry out other, covert work, instead of normal diplomatic duties and powers. They are used in propaganda and media campaigns to influence political and public opinion about their country, or put pressure on journalists with dual nationality or other critical voices to censor them.

Where possible, the Dutch intelligence services keep tabs on foreign governments' attempts to covertly place intelligence officers in the Netherlands as diplomats. On several occasions in recent years, the Netherlands has declared intelligence officers acting under diplomatic cover to be persona non grata, including 17 Russian diplomats in 2022.³¹

There are also foreign governments that take a whole-of-society approach, meaning that in addition to the government, they consider all citizens, associations and companies – including those based abroad – as potential proxy.

Undermining influence of the diaspora, through the diaspora

A diaspora community is useful to a foreign government because of its political or social reach representing a large group of individuals, and because of its (social) position and integration in the target country. By mobilising organisations or groups within a community, they can serve the interests of the country of origin. This is done, for example, by having certain views expressed openly during demonstrations and events, or by organising them, or, on the other hand, by raising a protest voice against developments that go against the interests of the country of origin.

Associations or influential people belonging to a community, such as community leaders or clergy, can also be used to mobilise a larger group of people within a community. They have a certain prestige or status politically or socially, or have a potentially large reach (e.g. through social media). In exchange for cooperation, they receive rewards such as (financial or other) benefits or preferential treatment, although sometimes they also fulfil these roles out of loyalty and ideological devotion.

Undermining influence on politics, through the diaspora

The Dutch political landscape may be of interest to foreign governments. Decisions taken or policies made by Dutch politicians may touch on their interests, so it may be relevant for those governments to try and influence our politics and policy-making. Such influence by foreign governments is problematic if their activities undermine our political decision-making processes, if they go against our legal or democratic frameworks, if they affect the freedoms of individuals in the Netherlands, or manipulate the free information environment or freedom of the press. Individuals and organisations within diaspora communities in the Netherlands can be used by foreign governments to exert undesirable influence on our decision-making processes.

In doing so, foreign governments are particularly interested in administrators, politicians or political organisations with ties or roots in their own countries. Foreign intelligence agencies invest in relationships with such individuals to win them over and make attempts to influence their opinions in favour of the country of origin. Foreign services can also try to use them as an extension to enhance the reputation of the country of origin. Such attempts mostly remain unsuccessful, but do not stop foreign intelligence agencies from continuing to try anyway. Indeed, a single success can make a lot of impact. With the help of these ‘political allies’, political or public opinion in other countries or EU-wide on relevant issues is influenced with their own views. For example, they submit resolutions or bring documents to the attention of MEPs or national politicians.

In January 2022, British intelligence service MI5 warned the British parliament about Christine Lee, a British citizen of Chinese background. According to MI5, Lee was allegedly involved in political interference activities in Britain. Lee claimed that her activities in Britain “represent the British–Chinese community and increase diversity”, but according to MI5, she acted covertly and in close coordination with the United Front Work Department/UFWD, an influence vehicle of the Chinese Communist Party. Her activities were allegedly funded by? China and Hong Kong.³²

Political influence via the diaspora also occurs by calling on the diaspora community to vote for candidates with ties to the country of origin. Alternatively, they are also advised against voting for certain political parties, for example those that are critical of the country of origin. These forms of influence include the use of organisations that can be considered unofficial representations of a foreign government. They are used by these governments for their own political agenda.

The German security service wrote about the Union of International Democrats (UID) in some of its annual reports. The UID has close contacts with the Turkish ruling AKP party and represents its political interests in several European countries. However, according to the German security service, the Turkish authorities managed to influence the opinions and behaviour of the Turkish diaspora through the UID, thus also indirectly influencing political decision-making processes in Germany. During the 2017 and 2023 Turkish elections, the UID mobilised as many Turkish voters as possible among the diaspora to cast their votes.³³

Not all political activities of foreign governments in the Netherlands are undermining. Foreign governments recruit votes within diaspora communities in the Netherlands for their own elections, for instance; especially within the larger communities such as the Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese there are many potential voters for foreign elections. If done in line with our legal and democratic frameworks, it poses no threat to our democratic legal order.

How prevalent is foreign influence through diaspora communities in the Netherlands?

Intelligence research suggests that, in general, the Netherlands is unlikely to be seen as a prime target for undermining influence. Indeed, foreign governments are more likely to focus their activities on countries that are more susceptible to influence, or which have more international influence. However, international institutions, such as those of the European Union and the International Criminal Court, are also prime targets for foreign governments. These institutions are part of the Dutch democratic rule of law. Moreover, the various foreign governments are opportunistic. If, in their view, an opportunity arises to gain influence in Dutch institutions via diaspora communities, they will act on it.

Intelligence research therefore shows that several foreign governments are trying to influence Dutch public and political opinion via diaspora communities, outside the framework of the democratic legal order. This is done through unofficial representations of these foreign governments in the Netherlands. Several foreign governments also have their attention focused on Dutch (local) politicians who are part of the relevant diaspora community.

The actual extent and impact of any political or social influence by state actors in the Netherlands is difficult to quantify. Influencing usually happens in a non-visible way and is a process over a long period of time. Also, individuals who are used for influencing activities need not be aware of the harmful intentions or consequences of these activities, or even that they are being used as a tool for influence. Moreover, the institutions of the Dutch democratic rule of law have a certain resilience which means that influence activities are by no means always successful and (negative) effects do not always materialise. Attempts at undermining influence are, for these reasons, not (directly) visible – unlike, for example, forms of transnational repression such as threats or violence.

3.3 Intelligence activities targeting diaspora communities

Foreign governments collect intelligence on (individuals and organisations within) their diaspora communities for various reasons (see also chapter 2). Diaspora communities in the Netherlands also face espionage activities from other countries. The nature and intensity of these activities may vary. This depends on the underlying reason for the espionage and the resilience of (potential) targets.

The modus operandi of foreign governments in intelligence activities targeting the diaspora

To monitor individuals and organisations within their diaspora and gather information about them, foreign governments have a multitude of sources and means at their disposal: open sources and social media, (formal or informal) networks of agents or human sources (informants), or the use of sophisticated cyber tools (such as spyware).

Foreign governments, and usually intelligence agencies on their behalf, collect personal data on a large scale. Not only from closed sources of information, e.g. by hacking hotel chains or telecom companies, but also from open sources. They can relatively easily take advantage of the openness of western societies and the international payments system to retrieve personal data. Publications by academics and journalists, including documents in which they are critical of the authorities in their countries of origin, are mostly easily available online. In addition to this, people share a lot of information, knowledge and emotions through social media channels, such as X or LinkedIn. These kinds of messages are publicly available to everyone, and therefore also to foreign intelligence agencies. Large-scale collection of personal data by foreign governments has also been observed in the Netherlands.³⁴

Diplomatic missions abroad and the staff and intelligence officers working there actively collect intelligence on diaspora communities on their own initiative or at the request of their authorities. This takes place via social media, as well as other sources. Apart from embassies, other organisations and agencies that are part of normal daily life are also a source of information for foreign governments. For example, commercial research agencies and media companies are used by foreign intelligence agencies to investigate citizens in the Netherlands, especially those who criticise the policies of authorities in the country of origin. Organisations or religious institutions where many members of a community gather, such as a mosque or a church, can be covertly infiltrated. In that case, these institutions may unknowingly be used as a source of information for a foreign government, therefore.

Various foreign governments have offensive cyber programmes that are deployed against the Netherlands, including Russia, China and Iran. Offensive cyber programmes are used for sabotage purposes or economic espionage, but also to covertly collect data on individuals in diaspora communities. This includes, for example, individuals and organisations designated as dissidents by a foreign government.

In some cases, foreign intelligence agencies and their proxies target individuals within a diaspora community directly with cyber assets, but also collect data on these individuals from other organisations. To do so, these services deploy spyware, among other things.

In October 2023, an investigative and journalists' collective revealed that the Egyptian secret service had installed so-called Predator spyware on phones of dozens of Egyptian journalists, human rights activists, political opponents, lawyers and academics. The Pegasus spy software similar to this spyware was previously found on the phone of slain Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.³⁵

Diaspora deployed for intelligence activities

Foreign governments and intelligence agencies use networks of human sources. Members of a diaspora community can be part of such a network: they are an important source of information for foreign agencies. In the Netherlands too, various countries try to recruit citizens and organisations to gather intelligence. These include people working in strategic positions, in vital sectors or who have access to relevant (personal and other) data.

In October 2023, a man was arrested on suspicion of possessing and disclosing state secret information. The court has not yet ruled on the case. The man, a Dutchman of Moroccan descent was on his way to Morocco, according to the prosecution, and was carrying a large number of digital (state secret) documents during the arrest, including an AIVD analysis on Moroccan intelligence activities in the Netherlands. The man, who had access to such information because of his position at the NCTV, is suspected of violating state secrets, whether on behalf of a foreign power, or not. The prosecution believes he has been in contact with Moroccan intelligence since 1995.³⁶

A foreign government or foreign intelligence agency can force cooperation by pressuring or threatening informants or their families. Information gathered on opponents is used against them, for example by persecuting them when they travel to the country of origin for holidays or family visits. Individuals may also be discredited and arrested for fictitious issues like drug smuggling or sex offences.

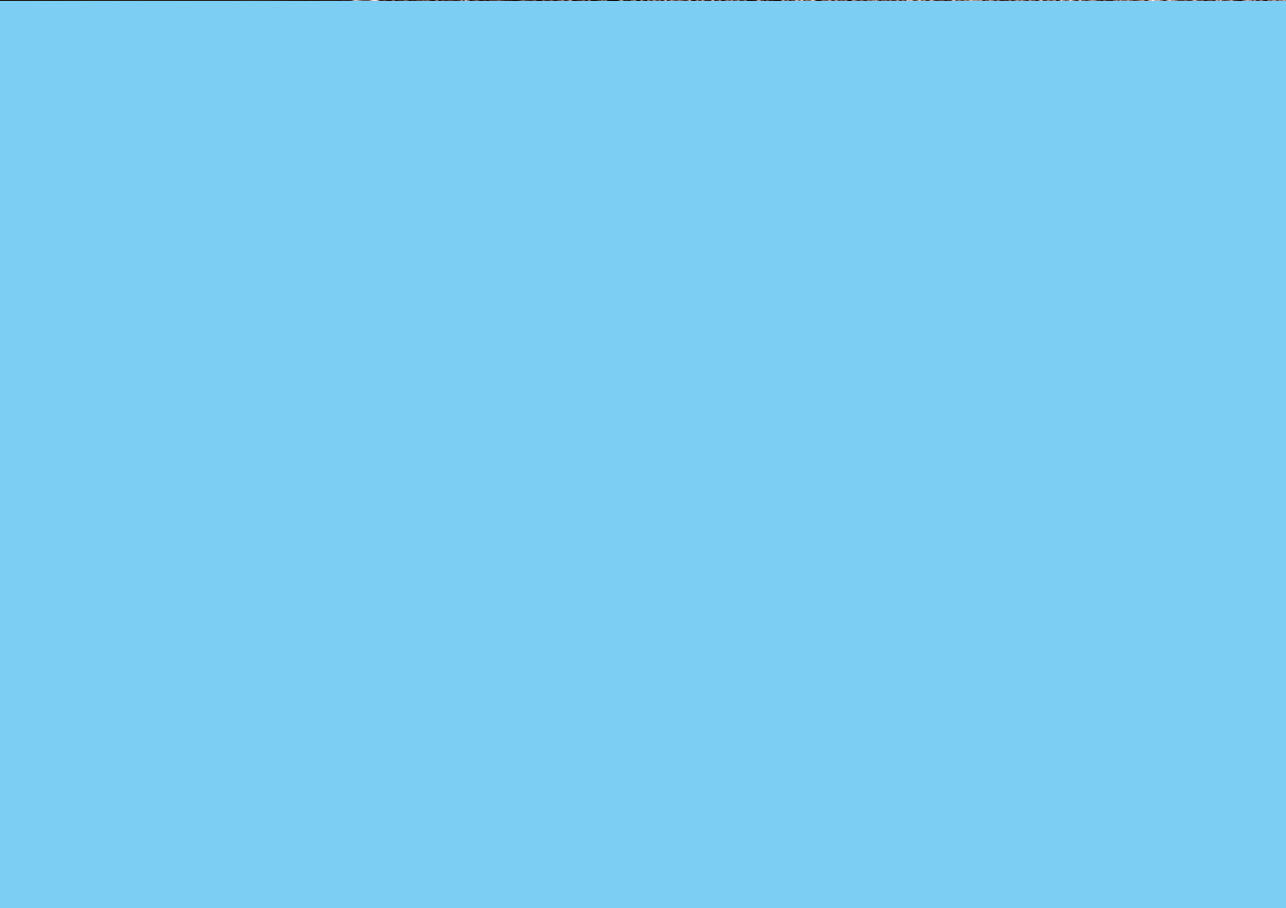
Coercion is not always necessary, however. Cooperation in espionage activities also takes place in exchange for financial compensation or other rewards, such as preferential treatment. There are also members within a community who are willing to share information about other people in that community out of loyalty or nationalistic feelings.

Academic research in 2020 revealed that Chinese students at Dutch universities are a major target of and a tool for political influence from China. The research found that they are often monitored by fellow students and/or the Chinese embassy and do not feel free to act or speak out on political issues. Lecturers would also regularly find that Chinese students do not feel free to engage in political discussions. The research also showed that the Chinese embassy in the Netherlands promotes self-censorship, as well as behaviour that supports Chinese policies among non-Chinese scholars, students, and university policymakers. In 2024, the journalistic medium Folia of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) wrote about Chinese students at the UvA allegedly suffering from interference from China, based on its own research.³⁷

Moreover, internal relations in some diaspora communities are very complex, caused by political disputes and cultural and religious differences based on the situation in the country of origin. This can result in polarisation, mutual distrust and uncertainty: which side should you be on and which side is someone else on? Many want to remain impartial, but feel forced to take sides. These circumstances foster situations where community members gather information about each other, and pass it on to others in the community, or to an embassy. The Eritrean community is illustrative of these circumstances.³⁸

How prevalent is espionage in diaspora communities in the Netherlands?

The intelligence a state actor collects on its diaspora is mostly used to facilitate activities of transnational repression and influence, but in various cases is also used for other purposes such as economic espionage. The AIVD can confirm from its own research that several countries collect intelligence on or through their diaspora communities in the Netherlands. Iran, Pakistan, Morocco and Turkey, among others, carry out these espionage activities. Other countries such as China, Eritrea and Syria are also considered likely to do so, as they are known to collect intelligence on or through their diaspora in other European/western countries. In the Netherlands, intelligence gathering takes place through informant networks (within diaspora communities) or by deploying cyber resources.³⁹



4 Complicating elements of state-sponsored interference

State-sponsored interference involves several elements that complicate the understanding of it and create challenges in addressing it. There are, for instance, dormant factors that can change the threat in the long term and over which little influence can be exerted. These include changes in the size of a diaspora community through immigration or emigration, the change in political stability in the country of origin or a change in the political attitude of a foreign government towards its foreign communities. Below are several other elements that make state-sponsored interference, and with that how to address it, complex./Other elements that make state-sponsored interference, and the addressing of state-sponsored interference, complex, are mentioned below. This list is non-exhaustive and is primarily intended to support future efforts to counter state-sponsored interference.

The impact of state-sponsored interference is not, or barely measurable

The actual impact of state-sponsored interference on diaspora communities, and thus on the democratic legal order in our country, is hard to quantify, if it can be quantified at all. This partly has to do with the/is partly due to the 'visibility': who is behind it, why are they doing this and what exactly are they doing?

In many cases, it is difficult to determine with a high degree of certainty exactly who is behind an action: the government of another country, a proxy on behalf of another government, or a fanatical loner acting of his own accord? In the case of a proxy or fanatical loner, it is also often unclear to what extent the relevant foreign government has control over them and is deliberately pushing for actions that undermine the Dutch democratic legal order.

The extent of political or social influence by foreign governments in the Netherlands is also difficult to measure. Nontransparency and deception are part of the nature and intent of covert influence. It usually happens in a non-visible way and often involves a process that takes place over a long period of time. Beyond this, forms of state-sponsored interference that unfold through open channels are not always easy to

perceive or recognise because they take place in local media, languages and dialects. The manifestation of undermining influence is also generally less visible than, for example, forms of transnational repression, such as threats or violence.

Actions are often very subtle. Methods are used whereby a victim is unaware of harmful intentions or consequences, or is even completely unaware that they are dealing with a form of interference by a foreign government. Some manifestations of state-sponsored interference are clearly visible (and therefore quantifiable as such), such as a liquidation, assault or abduction – provided it is also clear that they were initiated or carried out by a foreign power. In other cases, agents leave no trace. Take, for example, non-physical behaviour such as (online) harassment, which can take place from a distance.

Willingness to report among victims is low

Relatively few victims of state-sponsored interference report it to police or others. That is, possible cases of state-sponsored interference are by no means always reflected in registration figures. Since we have no absolute numbers on actual interference, we cannot compare this with the number of police or other reports. This is partly due to the aforementioned factors that make the phenomenon less ‘visible’. This is a problem both for the victims (do you make a police report of threats from a fanatical individual, or from someone who is threatening you on the instructions of a foreign government?) and for the agencies where the report can end up. Especially at the local level, agencies are often unfamiliar with the different issues at play within communities and/or a community’s country of origin. This can make it difficult to interpret the content of a report.

The low willingness to report among diaspora communities has several possible causes. Among some communities, for instance, there is probably an institutionalised distrust of the government,^{VIII} or of persons acting for or on behalf of the government. An example from the past is the distrust within Eritrean diaspora communities about Eritrean interpreters working for the IND: it was rumoured that among these interpreters were individuals with links to the Eritrean regime.⁴⁰ Distrust can lead to fear of possible reprisals, which can put pressure on the willingness to report. Another factor is that the threshold for people within diaspora communities may often be high; they do not have sufficient command of the Dutch language, or they are not used to the procedures involved in reporting to the police. The complexity of the phenomenon of state-sponsored interference and the aforementioned lack of measurability also makes it difficult to help people. The lack of help the Dutch authorities can offer may also subsequently affect willingness to report, as people do not see the point of reporting if they do not expect that anything will be done about it.

VIII For some communities, there is not only mutual mistrust between community members, but also individual mistrust towards authorities or aid agencies in the country they have come to. These individuals’ distrust is fuelled by their experiences with an autocratic or even totalitarian system, and may have been reinforced by what they experienced after leaving their country of origin.

Ties to the country of origin are a (potential) means of pressure

Many individuals belonging to diaspora communities retain some degree of connection to the country of origin for various reasons. People often still have relatives in the country of origin, or even own property there. It is known that these kinds of ties are abused by authorities from some of the countries of origin: access to property is denied, administrative hurdles are imposed, circumstances that could be used for extortion (for instance, debts or sensitivities in private spheres) are used to force some behaviour, or family members still living in the country of origin are intimidated, threatened, put to work or detained.

Many individuals in diaspora communities in the Netherlands hold multiple nationalities (and corresponding passports). This is not always a conscious choice, made by the individual themselves. Some governments automatically consider persons who have roots in their country as their own citizens, even if they are not resident or born there. Moreover, renouncing nationality is not allowed by some countries, such as Iran and Morocco, or is simply not accepted in practice. So that nationality means that individuals also remain tied to the country of origin. While this has advantages and is often desired, it also makes individuals vulnerable to influence or pressure. For instance, a foreign government can revoke a passport, or force its citizens to pay taxes.

International cooperation and information sharing

In carrying out their security duties, governments and security and police forces depend on timely, reliable and accurate information. Because certain threats are international in nature, such as terrorism and organised crime, international cooperation and data sharing are necessary. However, foreign governments can also abuse this cooperation and use it as an instrument of repression, for example by wrongly placing individuals on an international watch list or terrorism list. This analysis has identified several examples in which foreign governments try to secure the extradition to their country of political opponents, under the guise of criminal, genocide or terrorism suspicions. It is often difficult for other countries to assess whether such allegations are actually true.



5 Conclusion: the impact of state-sponsored interference

Various foreign governments engage in interference activities in the Netherlands against individuals and organisations within diaspora communities, which collectively form an essential part of Dutch society. These activities put pressure on victims' freedoms and create feelings of insecurity. This touches on important values of our democratic legal order. The interference activities of these foreign governments affect a large number of Dutch citizens and their freedoms within the various diaspora communities. This means that the phenomenon of state-sponsored interference in diaspora communities in the Netherlands is likely to have a significant impact on the Dutch democratic legal order.

State-sponsored interference puts pressure on diaspora freedoms and creates a sense of insecurity

Several foreign governments engage in interference activities in the Netherlands. The impact of this is significant for specific individuals and groups within Dutch society. For this group of victims, activities of state-sponsored interference create feelings of insecurity and affect their fundamental rights and freedoms. These freedoms are part of our democratic society and rule of law. As such, any form of state-sponsored interference touches on the values of our democratic legal order.

Activities by foreign governments, or fear of these, prompt a sense of insecurity among diaspora communities. Among other things, the liquidations of Samadi and Nissi and the mistreatment of a Pakistani human rights activist show that the most extreme manifestations of state repression also pose a threat to the (physical) security of Dutch citizens and residents.

Many diaspora communities in the Netherlands are small in relation to the entire Dutch population. Activities of state-sponsored interference mainly impact specific individuals or groups within a community, or these communities themselves. Therefore, the interference activities of a single foreign government mainly affect (individuals within) the relevant community, rather than Dutch society as a whole, unless severe forms of violence are used that can shock society.

However, there are a number of diaspora communities that are affected by interference activities by foreign governments. This concerns a large number of Dutch citizens whose freedoms are under pressure and who feel unsafe in the Netherlands.

State-sponsored interference creates mutual distrust and division within communities, and can contribute to negative perceptions

State-sponsored interference can result in social tensions and polarisation within diaspora communities. Feelings of insecurity damage mutual trust and can create distrust within communities. It has an impact on trust in the Dutch government. In some communities, there are already divisions because of cultural, religious or political differences based on the situation in the country of origin. Interference from foreign governments magnifies those divisions, making communities especially vulnerable. It causes members of a community to avoid contact with others, for fear of being reported, or to not speak out or speak out less about their political affiliation. Within diaspora communities, fear of a foreign government can arise even when there is no actual state-sponsored interference, but where such interference is assumed.

Existing tensions in countries of origin can spread into diaspora communities in the Netherlands, especially among the relatively large communities in the Netherlands. The likelihood of expressions of discord increases when there are multiple diverse ethnic and political groups within those communities. If a foreign government or person in power employs a certain rhetoric, for instance by distinguishing between 'good' and 'hostile' citizens, or by dehumanising certain groups within the population, this also leads to polarisation, social unrest or even perceived enemies within a community. This can negatively affect the integration of persons within the diaspora in the Netherlands and hamper the establishment of ties with the Netherlands.

State-sponsored interference targeting communities can, from the perspective of broader Dutch society, contribute to mistrust and negative perceptions with regard to (individuals within) those communities. This could, for example, result from incidents of (alleged) espionage or other activities directed against Dutch interests, or from social tensions within a community and possible nuisance as a result of that.

State-sponsored interference also poses a danger to the democratic rule of law to a lesser extent

For most foreign governments, the Netherlands is not a major target for undermining influence and its democratic institutions are so resilient that attempts to exert influence are far from always successful. Nevertheless, state-sponsored interference also poses a danger to the Dutch democratic rule of law. International institutions such as the European Union are part of the Dutch democratic rule of law and do constitute an important target. Foreign governments are, moreover, opportunistic. They let no opportunity pass to gain a position of influence within one of the Dutch democratic institutions, even if this involves acting via diaspora communities. A single successful attempt to do so can yield a great deal for a foreign government and at the same time can do a lot of damage to the integrity of the Dutch democratic rule of law.

Transnational repression targeting individuals within diaspora communities also affects the functioning of the democratic rule of law. Repression (and the fear of it) leads to self-censorship. This jeopardises fundamental freedoms that are essential for the functioning of the democratic rule of law, such as freedom of expression, a free judicial process, and freedom of assembly and press.^{IX 41}

A look ahead

State-sponsored interference is not a new phenomenon and will not disappear from the Netherlands in the coming years. The interests of foreign governments in regards to diaspora communities in the Netherlands will not change quickly and are usually persistently motivated by the desire to retain power in the country of origin. Repressive action against a country's own citizens and their diaspora communities is almost entirely institutionalised in autocratic governments for political, cultural and/or religious reasons. This is not likely to change even through diplomatic pressure, especially given the difficult relationship between the Netherlands and most of the countries involved. The current juncture is characterised by growing geopolitical rivalry between Western and non-Western countries, which means mutual relations are unlikely to improve any time soon. Moreover, that rivalry may serve to reinforce other countries' motives for interfering in foreign communities, thereby increasing the likelihood of state-sponsored interference.

Nevertheless, the Netherlands takes an active approach towards various foreign governments in response to incidents, and diplomatic relations develop on a country-by-country basis. The intelligence and security services, among others, are also actively working to counter the most severe forms of state-sponsored interference, and there are various initiatives that increase resilience to state-sponsored interference. As a result of these efforts, the degree and nature of state-sponsored interference is likely to change on a country-by-country basis and possibly decrease in the coming years.

On the other hand, there are persistent factors motivating the various foreign governments to continue interfering in foreign diaspora communities. There are, moreover, the elements described earlier that complicate state-sponsored interference and how it is addressed, and the challenges of the current geopolitical juncture. Finally, technological developments increase the potential for foreign governments to monitor and intimidate their diaspora communities remotely and on a larger scale.

Based on these factors, the AIVD and NCTV estimate that state-sponsored interference in diaspora communities will not disappear and may increase.

IX These feelings of insecurity are not out of the blue and also play out more widely than just among diaspora communities. The Clingendael Institute recently determined in its research that the threat of "unwanted state-sponsored interference in migrant communities in the Netherlands" is the second biggest threat in the eyes of the Dutch population.

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